"Landslide 13, We Are a Quarters. This Is Not a

by Ltjg. Juan Mullen

The first time a naval aviator goes to the boat is an exciting time. Landing on a moving platform validates all the hard work and training in flight school. I had heard that after finishing DLQs and returning to base, you often have a sense of relief that your next landing will be on a stationary platform. But, during my return flight, I felt everything but a sense of relief.

Our flight had started like any other. We briefed, preflighted, copied down important information from our overhead message, and walked to our aircraft. My HAC was a new FRS instructor, but he had over 2,000 hours in the aircraft, so I felt comfortable flying with him. After launch, we headed 280 to intercept the USS *Pearl Harbor*. The ship's TACAN wasn't working (problem number one), and after reconning two ships, we found the LSD. When we arrived overhead (on time, according to our message), we found the ship at least 20 minutes away from flight quarters. We entered starboard delta, burned gas and holes in the sky (problem number two).

Besides getting our deck-landing quals, we needed vertrep qualification. The ship did not have a practice load ready, adding 10 minutes to our holding pattern. In the ship's defense, prior to our arrival, they had landed and launched only one H-60 since coming out of the yard (problem number three). They improvised a load for us and gave us a green deck. I rolled out on final for my first shipboard landing. With the help of my outstanding crewchief, I crossed the deck edge and landed with a slight thud.

We realized that because of the delays, we only would have enough time and fuel to complete DLQs and vertreps for one student. Before the first student moved on to his day vertreps, we

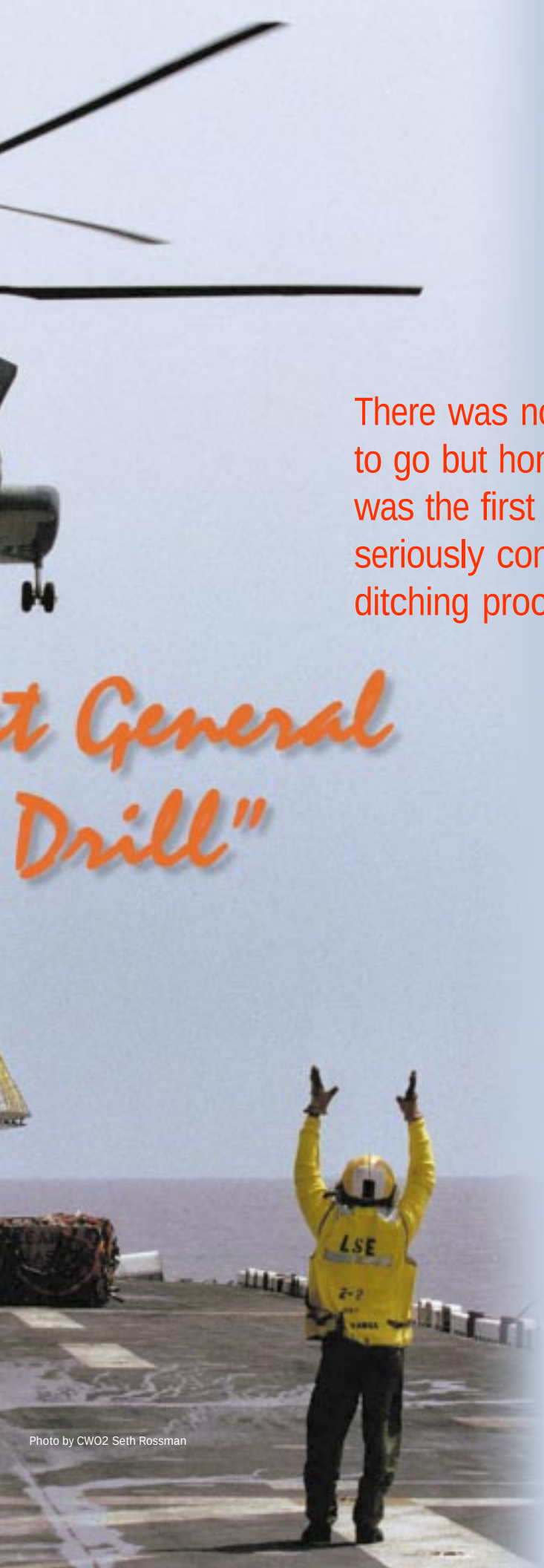

Photo by CWO2 Seth Rossman

would have to take a drink (problem number four). Not being the priority, I jumped out and went to the tower.

After six quick DLQs, the aircraft landed and the crew called for fuel. The fuel was rejected for having too much water. The grapes flushed the system and gave our crewman another sample. The second sample was better but still not good enough (problem number five). After flushing again, we got a good sample, and took our much-needed drink.

> There was nowhere else to go but home. This was the first time I ever seriously considered my ditching procedures.

The first student did great and completed his day requirements well before hitting bingo. Since sunset was still a ways off, we tried to get in my day DLQs. No sooner after I was strapped in, we noticed people scurrying around the deck. The tower informed us the ship was going to general quarters (problem number six). They wanted us to shut down. Wanting no part of the ship's emergency, we told tower we were ready for an immediate launch, and they accommodated us. We climbed out and once again entered starboard D. The HAC did a quick bingo calculation; we could continue to hold for 35 minutes before heading for North Island. At 30 minutes, we gave the ship a heads-up that we were approaching bingo, and they told us the ship's situation would be under control in a "few minutes." After a discussion with our crewchief, the HAC agreed to go below our bingo (problem number seven) as long as the ship guaranteed they would refuel us. The ship agreed.

Committed to the ship, we loitered well past our bingo to home base. At 10 minutes past bingo, the ship gave us a green deck, and we came in for fuel so we could hotseat the first student and complete his night quals. While we changed crews and waited for the grapes to give us another fuel sample, the No. 2 low-fuel light illuminated (problem number eight). I jumped out of the aircraft to watch night ops from the tower. Once again, the fuel samples were bad. The HAC did another quick fuel calculation and decided we could make it back to North Island with the fuel remaining.

From the tower, I could see Point Loma, but I also could see lightning strikes just to the south. I boarded the aircraft and we launched for home. The weather to the south of North Island had been deteriorating (problem number nine). I assumed the crew had taken the weather into consideration when deciding to fly home, but I didn't know for sure. Within a couple of minutes after launch, the No. 1 low-fuel light illuminated, indicating we had 340 pounds of fuel in that tank and less in the No. 2 tank, (since that light had illuminated 10 minutes prior). I heard the HAC request a heading and DME to North Island. The ship's CIC replied it was 110 degrees at 21 DME. As it turned out, home base was closer to 30 miles away (problem number 10).

From the windows of the aircraft, I could see the lights of Point Loma; my heart was pounding. Even though I was not up ICS and I couldn't hear the crew communications, I could see two low-fuel lights screaming at me. I tried to do some fuel calculations in my head, based on the last numbers I'd heard, and determined we would be extremely close to our landing fuel limit. There was nowhere else to go but home. This was the first time I ever seriously considered my ditching procedures. As we rounded Point Loma, the HAC declared minimum fuel. We all breathed a collective sigh of relief as we touched down with exactly 200 pounds of fuel per side.

After our debrief, I asked the HAC to explain his decision-making process. Since we had enough fuel to make it home and since he could see Point Loma from the ship, he felt we would be safe. When I asked if he had considered the weather, he said no, but he reiterated that he could see Point Loma clearly.

The lessons I learned from this first trip to the boat were many. First, never expect the boat to be where they said it would be, or when they said it would be there. Second, be wary of a ship that is just out of the yards. The crew may not be able to operate at the pace you would expect from a more seasoned crew. Third, get fuel from a ship before you reach a fuel-critical situation. Fourth, seek input from all members of your crew when possible. Fifth, when you notice problems beginning to pile up, (in our case, 10 of them) step back and do some quick ORM with your crew, or at least in your head. Our flight only was for FRS training and there was no need to push a bad situation. Last, always take weather into account when you are in a fuel-critical situation. If the weather had deteriorated further on our return, we might have been unable to shoot an instrument approach or proceed to an alternate. We would have had to ditch.

Ltjg. Mullen flies with HC-11.

Mishap-Free Milestones

HS-2
16 years (50,000 hours)

HS-8
20 years (64,000 hours)

HS-11
10 years (30,000 hours)

HMH-362
17 years (55,000 hours)

HMH-462
(40,000 hours)

VAQ-131
4 years (6,250 hours)

VAQ-133
5 years (6,550 hours)

VAW-117
23 years (50,000 hours)

VAW-124
8 years (15,000 hours)

VFA-125
9 years (163,000 hours)

VP-5
23 years (128,000 hours)

VP-47
28 years (171,000 hours)

VQ-3
24 years (193,289.8 hours)

VF-143
12 years (43,407 hours)
The Pukin' Dogs earned the 2000 CNO Safety "S" Award.